

Reviews & Debates

**THE IDEAL IMMANENT WITHIN THE REAL:  
ON PETER HUDIS' MARX'S CONCEPT  
OF THE ALTERNATIVE TO CAPITALISM**

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**Biographical Note**

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**Abstract**

Self-emancipation and humanism—rejected by some Marxists as unnecessary in the development of historical materialist theory—are in fact embedded at the core of any meaningful historical materialism. This comes out clearly in Peter Hudis's *Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism*. The principle aim of the book is to unearth the “prefigurative”—the vision of a new post-capitalist world—from the writings of a Marx usually seen as agnostic on the question. The search for this prefigurative Marx leads directly to the issue of how to reconcile the objective with the subjective, the objectively determined laws of motion in the economy with the emergence of a mass revolutionary subject. In tackling this Hudis opens up areas of inquiry central to the development of counter-hegemonic theory and practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Hudis, Peter. 2012. *Marx's concept of the alternative to capitalism*. Leiden: Brill. ISBN 978-90-04-22197-0. Hardback: 136 USD. Pages: 241.

The overall aim of Peter Hudis in *Marx's concept of the alternative to capitalism* is to unearth “the prefigurative”—the vision of a new post-capitalist world—from the writings of a Marx usually seen as agnostic on the question. The search for this prefigurative Marx raises an old issue: how do we reconcile the objective with the subjective, the objectively determined laws of motion in the economy with the emergence of a mass revolutionary subject?

There was a strand of the 1960s and 1970s New Left which identified the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century heirs of Marx and Engels as being imprisoned by the objective: overly relying on the laws of motion imputed to capitalism. This “objectivism” led inexorably to a praxis of passivity: calmly waiting upon the final crisis, to which those laws of motion would inevitably drag us. This objectivism was often called “Second International Marxism” (Colletti 1974), invoking the theoretically over-determined, but often inert politics of the Socialist International, an inertia on full display when the vast majority of its member parties collapsed into national chauvinism with the outbreak of the Great War in 1914.

The healthiest threads of subsequent New Lefts, from the 1970s to the present, have recoiled from this objectivist fatalism and embraced notions of self-emancipation, insisting that socialist revolution requires a self-active subject, a mass self-active subject. In other words, it requires a left that totally embraces democracy, cooperation and coalition building. This self-emancipationist New Left could and can be found in rank and file opposition to bureaucratic unionism; in anti-racist, feminist, and LGBTQ movements; and in the anti-war and anti-imperialist movements that emerge every time imperialism slouches towards another bloody adventure in the Global South.

Hudis pens a clear and devastating précis of some contemporary “objectivist Marxists,” theorists who “contend that Marx’s critique of capital is best understood as an analysis of objective forms that assume complete self-determination and automaticity” (Hudis 2012, 9)<sup>1</sup>—historical materialists who take the only possible subject in historical change (human beings) and transform it (us) into the passive object of history—making “capital in the abstract” the sole “active” subject. For certain of these theorists—Rob Albritton for instance—it means a collapse of a theory of capitalism into a theory of the market, an insistence on, in other words, a complete separation of the market and the state—and thus a denial that state-intervention can ever be associated with capitalism (14). Inevitably, this becomes an apology for the great state-capitalist dead-end we know as Stalinism.

Hudis, however, makes it clear that the alternative to Albritton’s objectivism cannot be found in the subjectivism of people like Antonio Negri. The insistence, by theorists such as Negri, that the laws of motion of capitalism are determined by class struggle can appear as a very tempting turn in critical theory, a way of asserting “agency” into the development of the economy. But its subjectivist face is, at the very least, a substantial over-correction to contemporary determinist historical materialism (26-32), and is sometimes worse: a back door through which hegemonic ideas can easily flow. Take the following widely adhered-to “class struggle as the objective” syllogism

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<sup>1</sup> Further references to this text are made with only the page number in parentheses.

1. Class struggle drives up wages;
2. Wage increases lead to declining profit rates;
3. Declining profit rates lead to crisis.

This “class struggle” historical materialism sounds quite radical, but in fact accepts a key tenet of neoliberal political economy—that capitalism’s economic problems are not inherent to capital itself, but can rather be laid at the feet of labour, of workers’ struggle for a living wage. These workers are described as militant by the historical materialists and greedy by the neoliberals. Historical materialists give this a radical gloss and say “our struggle for higher wages necessarily points towards a revolutionary rupture with capitalism.” But it has actually proven much easier for neoliberals to make the case that “we can avoid crisis if we don’t allow a struggle for higher wages”. In any case, the whole class struggle syllogism collapses in on itself when wages increase during periods of capitalist expansion: which, of course, is when wages do, in fact, increase.

A good portion of how we resolve the tension between the objective and the subjective turns on an assessment of Marx’s intellectual debt to the German philosopher Hegel. This has been a particularly annoying nugget on which the objectivists put much weight. If there is a subjectivist Marx, they argue, it is the young Marx, the Marx too influenced by Hegel. Once the maturing Marx gets over his youth, he also gets over Hegel, and embarks on “real” economics in his monumental study of capitalism. The mature Marx has made the move from liberal moralism to scientific socialism. This story is, however, not true. Hudis unearths the Marx of 1875 (i.e. the “old Marx” not the “young Marx”) and gives us the following: “My relationship with Hegel is very simple. I am a disciple of Hegel, and the presumptuous chattering of the epigones who think they have buried this great thinker appear frankly ridiculous to me” (5, n.7).

Let’s approach the main issue of the book from a different angle—why do any of us do what we do? Some of us try to analyze the laws of motion of capital. But none of us begin with “Capital” in the abstract. We begin with famine in Bangladesh, war in Vietnam, segregation in the Deep South, attacks on the right to choice on abortion, Minamata disease rearing its head in Akwesasne, police killing of Black youth in Ferguson, the exposure of the mass epidemic of sexual violence through the scandals swirling around Jian Ghomeshi and Bill Cosby. These are our motivations, and because of these issues of social justice (or rather our rage against social injustice) we start asking questions. Peter Hudis shows this was how it was for Marx as well. Hudis quotes a lovely letter from the 19 year old Marx, addressed to his father, a letter in which Marx says that he will no longer counterpose the ideal to the real—he will now be completely committed to Hegelianism (38). This is the same young Marx whose “very earliest writings also display a powerful feeling for *social justice*” (39). This “feeling for social justice”, Hudis is

arguing, remains integral to and embedded in his later analytic (political economic) dissection of “the real”. The admonition to no longer counterpose the ideal to the real does not mean: “be a materialist not an idealist”. It means “look for the ideal immanent within the real”. The essence of Hudis’s book is that within our real (actually existing capitalism) there has to be immanent an ideal (an emergent or possible socialist society) and that Marx knew this, even if he did not focus on it or make a big deal about it.

Hudis takes us on a journey to show that this ideal, immanent within the real, is only realizable through real, active, human agency. This is not only visible in Marx’s youthful 1843-1844 writings on Alienation, but equally so in the voluminous first, second and third drafts of *Capital* and in the three volumes of *Capital* itself. Here in mid-life when analyzing the laws of motion of capitalism, and a few years later when the late Marx interrogates the distant past (the nature of pre-class society) or contemporary events (the Paris Commune)—in all circumstances it is humans who emerge as the subject of historical change—labouring humans to be precise. At the centre of the story of *Capital* is the struggle of labourers to reduce the length of the working day. The story of the different phases of pre-class society is the story of the evolution of different phases of human labour. The story of the Paris Commune is the heroic story of the political and economic agency of human artisanal labourers in that moment of collective democracy. The essence of this millennia-long story of human agency is the push towards real democracy and real freedom. For Marx, “Freedom of the will is inherent in human nature” (40). This freedom is not contingent or “zero-sum”—that is, freedom for me and lack of freedom for others. For Marx, the meaning of freedom was identical to that espoused by Rosa Luxemburg: “Freedom is always the freedom of the one who thinks differently” (Luxemburg 1961, 69).

Understanding the limited and in fact “unfree” nature of contingent freedom certainly means a break from Stalinism, a political tendency associated with a horrifying 20<sup>th</sup>-century regression to mass forced labour in the Gulag. In a certain sense, that is why this book has been written. Stalinism has existed on many levels. The word signifies: a counter-revolution against Soviet power; a totalitarian state structure in the post-Thermidor society; the apologetic historical materialism carried by Stalinist epigones in the West; and the shadow over Western historical materialism, where any emergence of humanism or a historical subject immediately implies a critique of actually existing communism—and is therefore pushed into the background. Theoreticians might well be critical of the first two or even the first three of these significations of Stalinism. But the fourth—the denial of human agency in the historical process—is deeply embedded in the structuralism of Althusser, Poulantzas, Albritton, and others. In this sense, their theories, and the theories of other historical materialists who bury the subjective under the fictive self-movement of structures, are intimately linked to Stalinism’s long shadow.

The truth is, historical materialism is inconceivable without a human subject—and this is true not just for Marxism but also for Marx himself. Focusing on the question of humanism, insisting on a “subjectivism” as part of the essence of historical materialism, opens the door to what an alternative to capitalism will look like. We can “prefigure” socialism, if we accurately comprehend actually existing mass subjectivity.

How will labour lose its alien crust? How will production become something performed for human need, and not for private greed? Here an old fact becomes less accidental and more central to Marx’s thought—his love of the Paris Commune. There is a famous quote from Marx’s study of the Paris Commune where he says that the commune was “the political form at last discovered under which the economic emancipation of labour could be accomplished” (quoted in Lenin 1964, 436). This remains a beautiful and compelling statement. However, Hudis (185) uses a richer and much deeper translation of Marx’s original quote: “Such is the Commune—the political form of the social emancipation, of the liberation of labour from the usurpation of the (slaveholding) monopolies of the means of labour” (Marx 1975, 487). This version makes it absolutely clear – the solution to the objective contradictions of capitalism lies in the subjective actions of the labourers.

Hudis makes the point that this is not a momentary observation of Marx, but rather the crystallization of a notion of alternatives to capitalism immanent in his entire method. The barrier to seeing these alternatives is created in large part by the influence of Stalin and Stalinism. It cannot, however, be reduced to this influence. Remember—the Rosa Luxemburg quote above was directed not at Stalin and the Stalinists, but rather Lenin and the Leninists, for whom freedom too often meant precisely the contingent freedom critiqued by Marx.

Some of Lenin’s political positions are completely in tune with a self-emancipationist left. The Lenin of 1906 argued about the necessity “really to apply the principles of democratic centralism in Party organization” by which he did not mean more centralism, but rather more democracy. He called for party members “to work tirelessly to make the local organizations the principal organizational units of the Party in fact and not merely in name, and to see to it that all the higher-standing bodies are elected, accountable and subject to recall” (Lenin, cited in Liebman 1975, 51). The application of democratic centralism, understood this way, “implies universal and full *freedom to criticize*, so long as this does not disturb the unity of a *definite action*” (Lenin 1962, 443). Equally important is the Lenin of 1902, who threw down a “tribune of the oppressed” gauntlet which resonates to this day. “[T]he Social-Democrat’s ideal should not be the trade-union secretary, but the tribune of the people, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects” (Lenin 1961, 423).

But there were other sides to Lenin's politics. A "subjectivist" correction to passive determinism can—and often does with Lenin—represent a false freedom. Lenin and the Leninists were fiery opponents of Second International passivity. But their subjectivist corrective tended to shift agency from the mass to the minority organized in a vanguard party. Over time this evolved into a voluntarist subjectivism, a subjectivism which pressed so hard against the passivity of the Second International that the link between theory and practice was eventually completely broken.

The study of the Bolshevik experience cannot be reduced to a study of Lenin and the Leninists. Lenin's was just one wing of what was a mass, variegated phenomenon. Within the Bolsheviks, there were self-emancipationist tendencies. The rank and file militants, most of them Bolsheviks, organized in St. Petersburg's Inter-District Committee (the *Mezhrayonka*, whose supporters were known as the *Mezhrayontsi*) are a superb example. This self-emancipationist wing of Bolshevism was often at odds with the Leninists. The specific dispute with the *Mezhrayontsi* was Lenin's insistence, from 1912 on, of a hard-break from all other tendencies other than the Leninist. The *Mezhrayontsi* respectfully disagreed, and—in defiance of the Leninist leadership-in-exile—implemented on the ground what we would today call "coalition building" or a "united front strategy", building a network that would play a key role in the February 1917 Revolution (McKean, 1990; Thatcher, 2009). But by 1918 and 1919, it was the Leninist wing which came to dominate both the Bolshevik party and the new Russian state.

This state tried to impose its will on an impoverished, semi-peripheral, largely peasant country and force it onto a path of socialist revolution. The Russian masses were with them when that revolution led to the overthrow of the Czar. But when an extreme voluntarist subjectivism pushed the Bolsheviks to try and force the pace of history, the Bolsheviks lost the masses. With first a minority of the working class—and then increasingly just a Russian minority within a multi-national empire, and then increasingly just that section of the Russian minority organized in the party, state or Red Army—this subjectivism led to an increasingly substitutionist approach to revolution. It also led to increasingly desperate and doomed adventures, the 1920 invasion of Poland and the 1921 armed uprising in Germany (the March Action) being just two (Kellogg, 2013).

Both of these cul-de-sacs—that of the Second International passive objectivists and the Third International Leninist voluntarist subjectivists—proved fertile soil on which to nourish the Stalinist monstrosity which rose on the bones of the shattered Russian Revolution. At the level of theory, an "objectivist" reductionism imposed itself on two generations of Stalinist-influenced theoreticians, Althusserians and Poulantzans for instance, reducing capitalism to structures, reducing praxis to either passivity or uncritical party-building (critiqued brilliantly by E.P. Thompson in his *Poverty of Theory* (1978)). At the level of practice, the dead-hand of determinism was periodically replaced

by the red-hand of a really horrendous voluntarism. Stalin's Third Period abroad and Stakhanovism at home, Mao's Great Leap Forward and Cultural "Revolution"—these and others were the barbaric heirs of a refusal to acknowledge the limits imposed by material reality. If for Lenin and the Leninists, subjectivism was a political mistake—a mistake in large measure forced on them by isolation, poverty and desperation – then for Stalin and the Stalinists subjectivism became something more—it became a crime.

A central task in this discussion is to challenge mechanical understandings of the way in which consciousness changes inside the working class. According to Hudis:

He [Marx] consistently holds throughout his life that revolutionary consciousness spontaneously emerges from the oppressed in response to an array of specific material conditions. He does not hold that such consciousness is brought "to" the masses "from without"—in direct contrast to Lasalle, Kautsky and Lenin, who held the contrary position. At the same time, Marx does not equate the *consciousness* that emerges from the oppressed with revolutionary *theory*. The latter does not emerge spontaneously from the masses, but from hard conceptual labour on the part of theoreticians. Revolutionary theory needs to elicit and build upon mass consciousness, but it is not reducible to it (80–81).

A large part of the archaeology performed by Hudis involves digging into Marx's "voluminous excerpt notebooks, most of which were unknown until recently" (2, n. 1). The existence of "voluminous excerpt notebooks" is interesting in itself. Why, we might ask, did Marx find it necessary to so diligently copy out excerpts from the works he was reading? Perhaps the answer to this is not "subjective"—i.e., having to do with the personal work habits of Karl Marx—but rather "objective"—i.e., having to do with the context in which Marx was writing. He was, after all, living through what with the benefit of hindsight we can identify as a very, very early stage of capitalism. It must have been difficult indeed to peer inside this early capitalism and extract from it a sense of its dynamics, let alone a sense of a possible socialist future which might emerge from the struggle against this system. Seen this way, we can understand that: a) there is in fact a prefiguration of a post-capitalist society inherent to Marx; but b) given the opaqueness of the context in which he was writing, he was understandably reluctant to articulate his notion of post-capitalism, and is therefore rarely explicit; and c) from both of these flows the need for the big archaeology engaged in by Hudis. What results is summarized by Hudis very clearly:

Marx's entire body of work shows that a new society is conditional upon a radical transformation of labour and social relations. The measure of

whether such a transformation is adequate to the concept of a new society is the abolition of the law of value and value-production by freely-associated individuals.

This goal is not achieved, however, merely by some act of revolutionary will. It is achieved by discerning and building upon the elements of the new society that are concealed in the shell of the old one. This includes elucidating the forces of liberation that arise against capitalist alienation—which includes not only workers but all those suffering the ills of capitalist society, be they national minorities, women, or youth—which Marx referred to as the “new forces and passions” for the “reconstruction of society” (206).

The capitalism of our day may not be the late capitalism announced by Ernest Mandel two generations ago (1975), but it is certainly at the very least post-adolescent. In this more mature and therefore less opaque capitalism we can use the method of Marx—a critical apprehension of contemporary mass subjectivity—to add details to our sketch of post-capitalism. Perhaps we can go further than accepting an economic definition of class which limits us to adding on to the working class the struggles of “new forces and passions”, and instead expand our notion of the proletariat to include these new forces and passions. That will mean when assessing capitalism and post-capitalism, in order to hear today’s working class, we will have to listen to the experiences of all of today’s subaltern struggles: from the strikers wildcatting against Walmart to the Zapatista uprising, the World Social Fora, Occupy, Idle No More, civil society in Gaza and the protesters on the streets of Ferguson. Here we will encounter sites of struggle with evolving and instructive lessons in participation and democracy, lessons from which our generation of historical materialists can learn immensely. If we free ourselves from a narrow objectivism (and economism) and let ourselves listen to the new notions of freedom emerging from these contemporary movements against neoliberalism, against imperialism, against racism, and for popular sovereignty, then—after rescuing Marx from Althusser and Negri—perhaps we might be able to rescue democracy from the neoliberals. Peter Hudis has given us a very helpful set of tools with which to approach such a task.

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